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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a project designed to facilitate the rapid movement of adult students from the classroom into vocational training, jobs, or higher education. The project deals with junior and senior high school dropouts, some from New York and some from Puerto Rico. The basic premise of the program is that, while these students return to school because they feel they need further instruction in English, what they also need are other skills vital for success in the working world. Basic features of the program include: flexible class groupings, non-traditional classroom settings, reinforcement of a positive self-image, but most of all, training not only in English as a second language but also in academic skills (including test-taking strategies), vocational opportunities, and in the values and behavior patterns of the working world. The success of this program depends on a mutually supportive group of teachers who constantly examine and re-evaluate the objectives of the students and the program, diagnose the proficiency and learning problems of each student, and coordinate the teaching of the various skills on different levels. (Author/AM)

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MAKING IT IN THE REAL WORLD

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Our project was especially designed to facilitate the rapid movement of students from the classroom into vocational training, jobs or higher education. It has been functioning since 1972 when we helped design and implement it. There is continuous, on-going enrollment and continuous transfers to other programs. Our classes meet Monday to Friday, from 9 a.m. to noon, and are located in a neighborhood center that provides other services to our students.

The student body is made up of junior high school and high school dropouts, some from Puerto Rico, most from the New York City school system. They have come back to school because they feel they need further instruction in English. As teachers, we see that the returning adult not only is lacking in a large range of skills necessary for success in the real world, but also suffers from a poor self-image. Because of this, she is locked into a lifestyle from which it is difficult to escape.

Initially, students are assigned to a teacher for attendance purposes. Each student is then interviewed individually by a teacher who follows a questionnaire we have drawn up and revised over the years. The interview is a crucial part of the program. It is used as a diagnostic tool of language ability, as a measure of self-image, and as a source of background information. It provides the student with an opportunity to express her reasons for returning to school and reveals how she saw herself in past work and school situations. She then discusses her present goals and we help the student to begin thinking about what career might be realistic for her and what skills and traits are needed to meet these objectives. Often we find that students express a desire to

"be somebody", meaning that right now they feel they are nobody.

The interview, in conjunction with a teacher-made test, determines placement in a particular ESL group. Students are tested in reading and math and, their own perception of their needs taken into consideration, they are then assigned to subject and skill areas on their level. One of the most important aspects of our program is its flexible grouping. Since we currently have four teachers, there are four groups functioning in each skill area per class period. Each student moves through her assigned group at her own pace. There is constant diagnosing, retesting and evaluation by teachers and students, with periodical regrouping. This realistically allows the student to fill-in the gaps in her education which make the returning adult feel inadequate.

There is no pressure to complete the program in a specific time because it is open-ended. The student is encouraged to take responsibility for her own learning and the smooth functioning of the classes. We try to extend this sense of responsibility to completing a task, making up missed schoolwork, studying at home and helping new students adjust. We operate as a community of adults in an atmosphere of mutual respect. The classroom environment is non-traditional, which is important because the student failed in a traditional setting. The teachers are mutually supportive, meet regularly to share information, ideas and insights about students, and to prepare and select materials. Each of us teaches to his or her strength.

Though our students may come to us from other ESL classes familiar with the structures of oral English, most of them are not ready to qualify for job training, look for a job or function

in the job market. They immediately begin to work on the academic skills they lack, but at the same time we have to help them develop an awareness of the ways of the working world, its cultural subtleties, values and behavior patterns, sometimes known as the "hidden curriculum." These form the content of many of our lessons and an important part of daily activities.

Our students have been exposed to a very limited range of jobs and know very little of what careers are open to them today. Vocational information is included in much of our reading, discussion, and lectures by visiting speakers. On a more subtle level, many of our students do not have an American sense of time, with its stress on punctuality and the abhorrence of lateness in the business world. In our classrooms, there is continual emphasis on punctuality and avoiding as far as possible frequent absences. When they cannot be avoided, we insist that the students call in and give an adequate reason for the absence as they would have to on the job, since frequent lateness and absence are often cited as the most common reasons for firing of workers.

Many students have mentioned that they did not get along with authority figures or fellow workers in the past. In class, we practice business etiquette, courtesy, and a positive manner of relating to authority, avoiding submissiveness or hostility. They also practice following directions, giving explanations, and taking orders. Establishing peer rapport is very important, such as not laughing at one another's mistakes and learning to deal constructively with differences of opinion, while working together in large and small groups.

Before going to any formal interviews for training programs, volunteer or part-time work, our students start preparing. They become aware of the dress code of the working world, coming to school on occasion dressed as they would for an interview. They rehearse a confident walk and manner, other body language and making eye contact. Before arranging real interviews, the students role play and are sometimes screened for part-time work by counselors.

Using the telephone is a cultural skill we all take for granted, but one which non-English speaking people avoid in situations where English must be spoken. Sometimes we use teletrainers from the telephone company, but the classroom telephone is always an ongoing teaching tool. Students gradually become comfortable using it: first listening to taped information and passing it on to others, then using the directory and yellow pages and dialing Information. Next they answer the school phone, taking oral and written messages. They call for information on training, public examinations and job openings, make and cancel appointments and finally arrange for speakers, class trips and personal interviews. They practice solving problems without time-consuming visits to agencies and by dealing with the bureaucracy over the phone.

Test taking skills and strategies are important to our students who need to pass an exam to get an equivalency diploma, enter training or qualify for whatever they are interested in doing next. They share experiences, fears and ideas and go together in a group for moral support to take a test. We encourage them to become familiar with and comfortable in testing situations. Regardless of ESL, math or reading level, the High School Equivalency diploma

is most important to the students. We encourage students to take the GED in Spanish if possible, since it gives them a chance to use the skills and knowledge they have acquired so far, and when they pass, it enhances their self-image considerably. It is that necessary piece of paper that gains them entry into higher education, better training programs or better jobs.

Most under-educated adults, especially those who speak English as a second language, are overwhelmed by application forms: by the mechanics of filling in the boxes, by the vocabulary and especially by the need to have a coherent, organized mental picture of their past lives. In school they make a lifeline to help them see their lives chronologically, matching age, year and important events and, when this is complete, using it as a guide to fill in the names and dates in Educational and Employment History sections of an application or resume.

The students frequently need help in organizing their lives and their time, especially with scheduling housekeeping, child rearing chores, numerous medical appointments and studying. They also have trouble organizing important papers and usually carry them all jumbled in a pocketbook. We help them arrange these and have them practice filing and organizing at school. There they keep their own attendance folders and maintain files on a number of useful subjects such as: a community resource file, one on job training programs, others on colleges, high school equivalency scores, and information on past students. Some students go to typing and filing classes, others volunteer as clerks in the agency where the classes are located, or run our duplicating machine and take inventory.

Because many of our students are women, we work towards developing an awareness of the role of women in contemporary society. Most of them were brought up traditionally and need support and encouragement to see themselves in roles other than wife-mother-homemaker. Unless they can see themselves in the dual role of wage-earner and mother, they will never make it in the working world. We must be aware that when we ask a mother to take a salaried position, we are asking her to take a second job.

Since most of our students are Spanish, they have to deal with cultural opposition to the idea of a woman leaving the home to go to school or to work, and are often under considerable pressure. It is sometimes necessary to invite husbands, boyfriends, or fathers to visit the classes. On occasion, a woman will become the best educated in the family or earn more than the men, which may cause friction or severe problems. Fear of making a major change may lead her to become pregnant just as she is ready to take the next step. Many feel guilt at leaving their children. All of these problems form the topics of many discussions and readings.

Reinforcement of a positive self-image is built into the program. There is support on a student to student level, through peer-tutoring, peer-counseling, small group work and student evaluation of the program. Former students who are working, in college or in training programs visit the classroom and are a source of inspiration to the current student body. On a teacher/student level, we work with students to solve problems other than in academic areas. Speakers are invited into the classroom to cover areas of general concern and referrals to specific agencies are made where necessary, as we believe it is important to free the

learning channels from emotional problems so that students make optimum use of their time in school.

Another technique in helping students develop a positive self-image is to work with biographies of successful people. They are drawn from various sources and from a range of occupational fields. This helps them to determine what "success" is. It leads to discussion that easily relates to the student's own life. In addition, all students write their autobiographies. This is a crucial task that helps the student to get a proper perspective on her own life. The autobiography enhances the student's self-knowledge and helps her realize how much she has accomplished and how much she accomplishes every day. The autobiography increases the respect and admiration we have for our students as we learn in full all they have had to cope with.

Because the program is open-ended and so supportive, some students are reluctant to leave. They tend to cling to the security and comfort found here. Many too, have an all prevading fear of the world of work. Since it is part-time, our program fits easily into their schedule and it is difficult for some to adjust to full-time training or employment.

To help overcome these problems, we have incorporated into our program individual counseling, class workshops and visits to training sites and colleges. After being in the classroom for awhile, students are encouraged to undertake a volunteer position in an area that interests them. Some students are helped to get part-time Christmas selling jobs. This gives them a taste of the real work world, as well as knowledge about specific jobs and their own relationship to work. Having a good experience as a volunteer

or part-time worker helps the student become more self-confident and improves her self-image. All these students keep written records and report orally to classmates about their experiences. This sharing is motivating and, we feel, very valuable. In our program, we emphasize that we believe that our students will succeed and that the improvement in their academic skills, the enhancement of their self-image and the subtle changes of behavior that accompany it will help them function, achieve their goals and succeed in their new lives. We see our efforts as a synthesis of the educational, cultural and emotional factors necessary for MAKING IT IN THE REAL WORLD.